

# Last plane ride home

## Air Force NCO reflects on ceremony to send fallen Soldier home from AOR

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**SOUTHWEST ASIA** -- It was still dark on the runway when we gathered. Most of us were standing on an asphalt runway. I was just one more in a milling mass of uniforms.

It probably would not be appropriate to say how many are stationed here, but we comprise a small city -- about the size of Bethel, Alaska.

One thing the military does well is organize milling masses.

Before long the first sergeants and officers were calling out. We slowly shook ourselves into organized groups -- with long ranks of Soldiers facing long ranks of Airmen across a short stretch of pavement leading to the open bay of the C-130 Hercules.

I won't say this was a solemn group, but there was none of the usual griping heard from a large group of people being herded into a ceremonial formation.

We waited at parade rest for a considerable period of time.

Then, echoing down the ranks, the words repeated by each level of leadership, came the command "attention."

Shortly after came the command "present arms" as the official party came past.

From my place -- many ranks back in my squadron formation -- I could only see the heads of the official escort between the bent and unwavering arms of the men and women before me.

Were I a good Airman I would have, as is proper, only looked at the neck of the woman before me.

Well, the truth is that I am a willing but somewhat unremarkable Airman and so I slyly peaked.

This was an event I really wanted to witness and I certainly meant no disrespect in doing so.

Twelve men, all Soldiers, accompanied the coffin. I couldn't see much through the ranks of heads and arms.

I could only watch the helmet-covered heads of the pallbearers passing by bearing their burden.

And I could see that they were young and terribly serious.

Words were said, the coffin was carefully loaded aboard the airplane and the ramp closed.

We were dismissed.

To this day I do not know who it was that died. I suspect he or she was in the Army. They tend to do most of the dying in this region.

Now clearly this young person was known to the command and to family and friends, but for those of us drawn up in the early morning dark, this was our own unknown Soldier.

As American citizens we expect to have access to all the facts all the time, but as American military members, the rules and our own expectations are somewhat different.

There are certain situations where a multitude of detailed facts only obscure the central issue.

I'm comfortable with not knowing the details because the ultimate truth is clear. A young American died serving his or her country in a foreign land far from home.

Another truth was that I was proud to be there in the desert darkness with my fellow Soldiers and Airmen, paying our last respects to a fallen comrade-in-arms.

Sometime later, my squad mate and I were driving across the base and we saw the C-130 slowly, like a pregnant guppy, climb into the early morning sky.

Behind it the bright yellow ball of the desert sun was just crawling above the horizon.

I could only hope this Soldier had a smooth flight home.

## Commander's Connection



Photo by Tech. Sgt. Shirley Henderson

**Col. Bill Hyatt, 20th Fighter Wing commander, kicks off the Tops in Blue performance at Patriot Hall Nov. 22.**

"Commander's Connection" is a link between Col. Bill Hyatt, 20th Fighter Wing commander, and the Shaw community.

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## Kudos

I would like to express my deepest thanks and appreciation to Master Sgt. John Kennedy, 20th Mission Support Squadron readiness NCO in charge, for spending his free time to facilitate the deployed spouses meetings. He remembers every name and does his best to make all of us feel included. He also is very interested in our personal welfare. When my husband is deployed, it's nice to be apart of something that helps me feel like part of the Air Force family. Shaw is a much better place because of him.

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